



Disability Awareness Month



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Born in Bonn in 1770, the eldest son of a singer in the Kapelle of the Archbishop- Elector of Cologne and grandson of the Archbishop's Kapellmeister, Beethoven moved in 1792 to Vienna, where he had some lessons from Haydn and others, quickly establishing himself as a remarkable keyboard-player and original composer. By 1815 increasing deafness made public performance impossible and accentuated existing eccentricities of character, patiently tolerated by a series of rich patrons and his royal pupil the Archduke Rudolph. Beethoven did much to enlarge the possibilities of music and widen the horizons of later generations of composers. To his contemporaries he was sometimes a controversial figure, making heavy demands on listeners both by the length and by the complexity of his writing, as he explored new fields of music.

Beethoven completed nine symphonies, works that influenced the whole future of music by the expansion of the traditional classical form. The best known are the Third, "Eroica", originally intended to celebrate the initially republican achievements of Napoleon, the Fifth, the Sixth, "Pastoral", and the Ninth, "Choral". The less satisfactory Battle Symphony celebrates the earlier military victories of the Duke of Wellington.

Beethoven wrote only one opera, eventually called Fidelio after the name assumed by the heroine Leonora, who disguises herself as a boy and takes employment at the prison in which her husband has been unjustly incarcerated. This escape opera, for which there was precedent in contemporary France, ends with the defeat of the evil prison governor and the rescue of Florestan, testimony to the love and constancy of his wife Leonora.

Beethoven contemplated other operas, but eventually only wrote the one, first staged in 1805 and mounted again in a revised performance in 1814, under more favourable circumstances. The ballet The Creatures of Prometheus was staged in Vienna in 1801, and he wrote incidental music for various other dramatic productions, including Goethe's Egmont, von Kotzebue's curious The Ruins of Athens, and the same writer's King Stephen.